

AMENDMENTS OF THE CLAIMS

Listing of Claims:

Claims 1-12 (Cancelled)

Claim 13 (Currently Amended): A countercurrent process for the continuous esterification of C₁₋₂₂ fatty acids with C₁₋₁₀ monoalkanols, C₂₋₅ di- or trialkanols or mixtures thereof, said process comprising:

- (a) partially reacting the fatty acids and alkanols in a preliminary reactor in the liquid phase in the presence of a heterogeneous catalyst selected from the group consisting of organic or inorganic, basic or acidic, anion or cation exchangers, acid clays and zeolites,
- (b) passing the partially-reacted reaction mixture to a separation unit,
- (c) removing water from the partially-reacted reaction mixture in the separation unit,
- (d) passing the resulting de-watered, partially-reacted reaction mixture to a countercurrent reaction column with attached rectifying column on top,
- (e) further reacting the fatty acids and alkanols in the countercurrent reaction column in the liquid phase in the presence of heterogeneous catalysts, and
- (f) removing the water and excess volatile components through said rectifying column, and
- (f) (g) removing the crude product from the bottom of the said reaction column.

Claim 14 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 13, further comprising increasing the vapour load in the lower part of the reaction column by feeding nitrogen into the reaction column at the lowermost plate.

Claim 15 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 13, wherein the preliminary reactor is a fixed-bed reactor.

Claim 16 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 13, wherein the esterification reaction is carried out at temperatures of 50 to 200°C.

Claim 17 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 16, wherein the esterification reaction is carried out at temperatures of 80 to 150°C.

Claim 18 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 13, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₁₋₁₀ monoalkanols.

Claim 19 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 18, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₁₋₈ monoalkanols.

Claim 20 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 18, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with isopropanol or 2-ethylhexanol.

Claim 21 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 13, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₂₋₅ di- or trialkanols.

Claim 22 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 21, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with C₂₋₃ di- or trialkanols.

Claim 23 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 21, wherein the fatty acids are esterified with glycerol.

Claim 24 (Cancelled)

Claim 25 (Currently Amended): The [[A]] process according to claim 13, wherein acidic cation exchangers are used as the catalyst.

Claim 26 (Previously Presented): The process according to claim 13, wherein the heterogeneous catalyst is selected from specially worked-up bleaching earths and catalysts based on transition metals.